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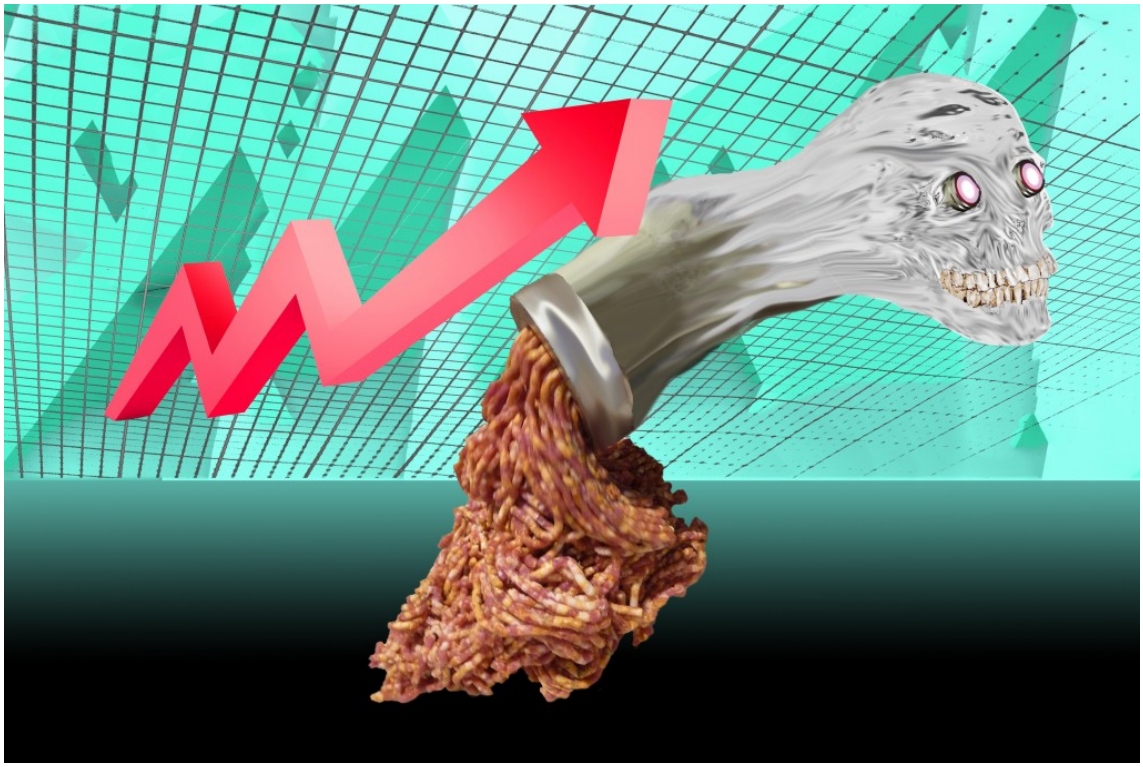
WHATEVER IT IS, WE'RE AGAINST IT
SINCE 2000

Crash and Burn: Debating Accelerationism

Alexander Galloway in conversation with Benjamin Noys.



(https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am//crash-and-burn-debating-accelerationism/malign-velocities-cover-3/)

Cover image of *Malign Velocities*, courtesy of Dean Kenning

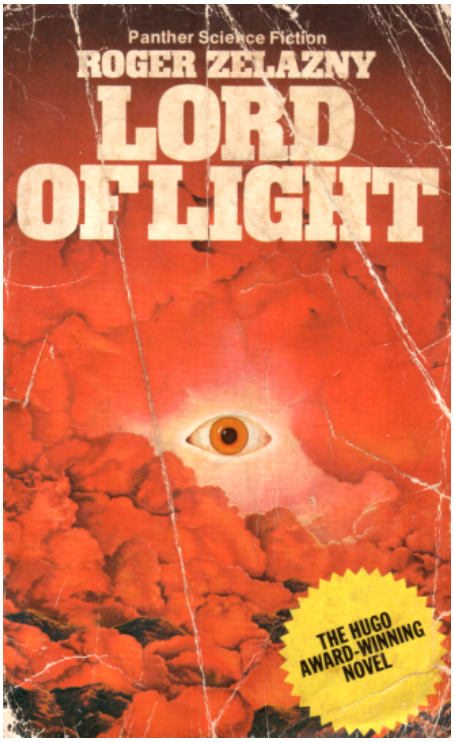
Accelerationism emerged as the latest theoretical trend with the publication of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' #Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics (http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/) *in 2013. The book was quickly translated into at least seventeen languages, including German, French, Portuguese, Russian, Turkish and Korean. In 2014 came the publication of* #Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader (http://www.urbanomic.com/pub_accelerate.php)*, edited by Robin Mackay and Arman Avanessian, and during this period a series of public events, seminars and discussions on accelerationism took place, including in Paris, New York, Berlin and London. This appropriately accelerated discussion has often taken place in relation to the art world, including a special issue of the journal* e-flux (http://www.e-flux.com/issues/46-june-2013/)*, and has been characterized by heated polemic.*

This interview brings together one of the leading critics of accelerationism, ***Benjamin Noys****, who coined the concept as an object of criticism and has just published his critique* Malign Velocities (http://www.zero-books.net/books/malign-velocities) *(Zero, 2014), with* ***Alexander R. Galloway****, an author and programmer working on media theory and contemporary French philosophy. In the discussion they explore the battles over the definition of accelerationism, the role of the negative, questions of abstraction, and the appeal and perils of fantasies of acceleration. The interview was conducted by email and in person between 23 October 2014 and 3 November 2014.*

AG: You have a new book titled *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism* (http://www.zero-books.net/books/malign-velocities). This is an occasion to celebrate, in any event. And I wonder, even in the spirit of recapitulation, if you might simply define "accelerationism" for us and explain why you decided to return to this concept from your previous book, only now as an "enemy"?

BN: One of the difficult issues in discussing "accelerationism" is that so much of the debate has turned on what exactly that term means. I would say in light of the most recent articulations a simple one-line definition might

be: “Accelerationism is the engagement and reworking of forces of abstraction and reason to punch through the limits of an inertial and stagnant capitalism.” Whereas previously much of what I called “accelerationism”, especially in the early 1970s work of Gilles Deleuze and F élix Guattari, Jean-FranÃ§ois Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard, involved a qualified playing with the “accelerated” forces of capitalist production, the current forms stress the need to find new forces that can act against a capitalism that no longer seems to deliver on the “promise” of acceleration. The key figure here is Nick Land (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Land), once an academic at the University of Warwick and now a journalist in China. Land’s work in the 1990s provided the most extreme statement of an endorsement of capitalism, or tendencies in capitalism, as mechanisms of acceleration and disintegration. In many ways contemporary accelerationism defines itself *against* Land, although he still exerts a certain fascination. His recent interest in neo-reactionary thought (http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/) makes this fascination problematic, to put it mildly.



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In terms of my new book I should say I have always been highly skeptical about "accelerationist" strategies, of whatever variety. It was the fact that what I had coined as a term of criticism – although I later found the word occurs in Roger Zelazny's 1967 novel *Lord of Light* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_of_Light), which I had read – was now being celebrated that was one of the drivers for the new book. The return of interest in strategies of acceleration at a time of capitalist crisis is not surprising, especially when that crisis is taking a long-drawn out and often highly uneven form. In the face of calls for austerity, which almost always fall on the victims of the crisis, signaled in the popularity of the "Keep Calm and Carry On (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_Calm_and_Carry_On)" meme in the UK, a counter-reaction is obvious. While I share the hostility to demands for sacrifice and austerity I think that accelerationist strategies too often feedback into a desire for a return to a, supposedly, productive capitalism. This is what I have called "capitalist Ostalgie." If "Ostalgie (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ostalgie)" was nostalgia for the lived experience of "actually-existing socialism", capitalist Ostalgie is a nostalgia for the images of capitalist dynamism, especially that of the new technologies during the 1990s.

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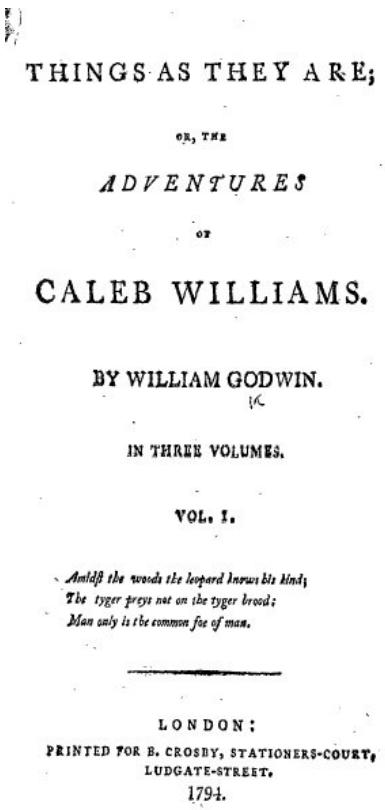
AG: Today's intellectual current seems to be forking in two distinct directions. The dominant fork is, as you suggest, a kind of technophilic, network affirmationism. But there is an alternative path evident in some of your writings, a path that leads through the negative. Curiously, that erstwhile paragon of progressive theory, Gilles Deleuze, appears now as something of a villain. I recall you use the term "Deleuzian Thatcherism" at a certain point. Can you describe your interest in the negative? Why are you calling for a return to the negative? And what might it offer for the future?

BN: I used "Deleuzian Thatcherism" in the '90s to describe Nick Land's work and what I saw as the convergence between his work and certain hyper-Thatcherite currents, which someone referred to at the time as "Thatcherism in its Maoist Phase". I think, now, a more accurate but inelegant characterization would have been "Lyotardian Thatcherism", as Land seems to take a lot more from Lyotard's 1974 book *Libidinal Economy* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libidinal_Economy), with its argument that there is only one libidinal economy and that this is capitalist. While it's true that the work of Deleuze, and especially that of Deleuze and Guattari, has never been to my taste, when I wrote on him for my book *The Persistence of the Negative* (http://www.euppublishing.com/book/9780748638635) I found more appreciation for his work. There is, if we like, a "negative Deleuze". Also, I think the debate about accelerationism has sharpened positions and I've had interesting and supportive responses to my critique from those who are sympathetic both to Deleuze and to Guattari.

In terms of the negative my interest really emerged out of noticing how easily it was being dismissed and how much of contemporary thought defined itself as affirmative or positive, which is what I called, borrowing from Badiou, "Affirmationism". Obviously we could include accelerationism, with its positive attitude to technology, reason and abstraction, within this broad category. At the same time, despite misunderstandings, this turn to the negative was not simply a matter of miserabilism or "negativity", in the common use of the word, on my part.

I'm not sure whether I qualify as a "happy person", but my aim wasn't to celebrate the virtues of depression. Instead, negativity interests me as a way to define a practice of contestation and rupture, and not least to disrupt all the calls to embrace the positive, to embrace "things as they are", as William Godwin put it. So, a return to the negative is a return to rethinking the negative, not as a "pure" state, but as intertwined with affirmative moments and as a means of thinking change. It is actually the case that "affirmative" thinking is often accompanied by a celebration of hyperbolic and extreme negativity, by a stress on suffering and misery, but only as moment subordinate to a sudden transformation.



THINGS AS THEY ARE;

OR, THE

ADVENTURES

OF

CALEB WILLIAMS.

BY WILLIAM GODWIN.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

Amidst the woods the leopard knows his kind;
The tyger preys not on the tyger brood;
Man only is the common foe of man.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR B. CROSBY, STATIONERS-COURT,
LUDGATE-STREET.
1794.

(https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am//crash-and-burn-debating-accelerationism/calebwilliams/)

Accelerationism stakes a lot on its ability to imagine the future, especially with the acid test of accepting the future need for space travel (with moon gulags, in the joke, for dissidents). Within the provocation and technological utopianism I think there is something to the accelerationists' stress on not imagining a future communist society as merely ameliorating capitalist barbarism with what Marx called a "barracks communism". What concerns me, which is another reason I turn to negativity, is not the

difficulty in imagining the future, but the difficulty imagining how we might get there. For this reason I have stressed negativity as a form of struggle that operates within a horizon of past struggles, which must be affirmed, in the attempt to decommodify the world, as well as to break with other forms of state power and other forms of oppression and violence.

AG: Along those lines, what is the connection, if any, between negation and *nihilism*, a philosophical tendency that has rebounded in recent years? I'm thinking of the "wider field" of speculative realism stretching from Ray Brassier to Eugene Thacker. We seem to be in the middle of a kind of Existentialist Revival.

BN: What's interesting in the recent articulations of nihilism is that they tend to evacuate or even annihilate the subject, unlike classical existentialism. While I have some interest in nihilist thinking, dating back to readings of Re/Search (http://www.researchpubs.com/) as a teenager and then through my work on Bataille, I think this hyperbolic nihilism often ends up circling back to affirmation – in this case the affirmation of a universe which has no need of subjects. In my terms, thinking of negation, I would like to distinguish negativity from any hyperbolic negativity or nihilism, by stressing that negativity is a practice that engages with points of contradiction and violence. My view of negation is a deflationary one, trying to shift out of the desire to contemplate or even wallow in some collapse of all values, to consider the tensions of negation.

In terms of accelerationism nihilism carries different values. It was obviously crucial to Nick Land, who deployed a nihilism developed from Bataille and Schopenhauer to annihilate the ego. In this vision, we embrace what Nietzsche called "European nihilism", embodied in the nihilist drive of capital to reduce everything to value, as the means to overcome humanism and to become fully disenchanted. Contemporary accelerationism sometimes tries to weaponize nihilism as almost a therapeutic device, while other currents stress the need to reinvent norms out of an "inhumanism" that can recreate and take the human beyond itself. I'm skeptical of the

invocation of a "hard-edged" nihilism, which seems to me to abandon a lot of crucial questions by invoking a "levelling" of values that is, at best, highly uneven. It may even be, ironically, that a radical nihilism is consolatory – giving us a weird sense of security by reaffirming our pointlessness. In this there is a risk of the return of the subject as the one who is able to proclaim the nihilist "bad news" and so remain somehow superior or immune – a kind of cult of non-personality.

AG: One of the classic debates in leftist theory is that of orthodoxy. LukÃ¡cs famously asked: What is orthodox Marxism? And his unorthodox answer ironically helped solidify a new kind of cultural Marxist orthodoxy in the decades since. Reza Negarestani has labeled this a form of "kitsch" Marxism (http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/), suggesting the need for a renewed critique of orthodoxy. How best can we square the necessarily dialectical movement of history with certain foundational categories like justice, democracy, or the people?

BN: I would almost certainly fail any test of Marxist orthodoxy, or even unorthodoxy. This is not because I regard myself as original or dissident, but due to my lack of thorough knowledge of Marx and Marxism and my own formation, which owes something to anarchism, a lot to the Situationists, and more than a little to my maternal grandfather's straightforward socialism and his stories of his life as a union representative while working on the railways in London (I perhaps also owe something to my paternal grandfather's ad hoc practice of the "refusal of work"). The result is that my "Marxism" is probably more suspicious of a belief in the productive forces than some of the classical forms and more geared to a suspicion of the category of labor.

In terms of Reza's characterization there is a truth to the claim that certain forms of postwar Marxism tended to an extreme pessimism, as every undergraduate who does cultural studies usually learns. I have more sympathy for this trend – I think Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/) is a brilliant

book. But, of course, a characterization of capitalism as completely dominant, a characterization of all life and culture as completely determined by capital, leaves little to do (and I think very few actually said this). On the other hand, the accelerationists' critique seems to me to bend the stick too far in the other direction, implying too much acceptance of contemporary technological and cultural forms that does not really consider how they are shaped by capitalism. Presenting capitalism as a parasite (I always think of *Futurama*'s brain slugs) implies that we simply shrug off the parasite to get back to a neutral technological or cultural possibility. I think capitalism shapes our context and existence in subtler ways than that, although it is always a *contradictory* social formation. While I would say there is no simple "outside" to capitalism, I don't think this is a counsel of despair because I'd attend to the contradictions and struggle that always and everywhere exist within this social relation.

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AG: Let's talk in particular about abstraction. Abstraction has always presented something of a problem within critical theory. Yet today many on the left are taking up the question of abstraction again with renewed energy. How do you understand the role of abstraction today? Do you think of abstraction in philosophical terms or in, shall we say, strictly material terms?

BN: I think the crucial category here is Marx's "real abstraction", or more precisely Alfred Sohn-Rethel (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Sohn-Rethel)'s formalization of Marx's comments to define this concept. The paradox of "Real Abstraction" is crucial, in that abstractions, notably "abstract labor", are very real and very abstract *at the same time*. In this way abstraction is brutally material in the way, for example, it violently homogenizes all forms of labor into the category of abstract labor, which is geared to value production. Keston Sutherland (pdf here (http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/World%20Picture/WP_1.1/KSutherland.pdf) has written very nicely on how Marx's German word "*Gallerte*", usually translated as "congealed", refers to boiled down animal products (blood, bone, connective tissue, etc.). When our labor is congealed into abstract labor we become mere "ingredients" and, as Sutherland says, we are processed into abstract "stuff". I think this usefully expresses how the usual oppositions of abstract and concrete or abstract and material don't quite capture this process. The abstract is concrete or pseudo-concrete.

This is why, in what's becoming a theme of this conversation, I think accelerationists are right, but for the wrong reasons. They are right to draw attention to abstraction as a crucial process, but they disengage it too rapidly from this horizon. This is why I think there is a tendency in their work to fetishize abstraction by choosing its most extreme forms to focus on, such as High-Frequency Trading (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-frequency_trading). While this form of algorithmic trading expresses, almost too perfectly, a kind of terminal point of commodity fetishism, in which all we have are ghostly circulations of value, it too requires a brutal series of interventions into "material" forms (as Alberto Toscano (http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/gaming-plumbing-high-frequency-trading-and-spaces-capital) has explained). I'd add that this attention to the extreme forms of abstraction also risks missing the more prevalent global forms of real abstraction that, as with abstract labor, dominate and pervade our experience.

It's for this reason that I also suggest we need to traverse abstraction and can't simply leap out of abstraction into some "good" alternative. The very search for such alternatives, such as the valorization of the concept of "life" as an excessive force, seems to me to create another abstraction. My problem with accelerationism is that it embraces and then abandons this ground of abstraction. Certainly it does not seek an outside point, a cozy "warm abstraction", but in its embrace of "cold abstraction" as a global force it neglects these effects of "processing" and the material becomes disembodied in the fantasy of full integration with the abstract.

AG: From abstraction to culture: you also have a keen interest in art and culture. But culture is so unfashionable today! The Linguistic Turn, with its focus on culture and ideology, has been targeted by a number of new schools of thought, including speculative realism and new materialism. Hermeneutics and other interpretive methods, once so dominant, are suffering in the academy at the hands of "distant reading" and other positivistic approaches. What is your relationship to those once stalwart critical methods? I'm thinking of allegory in particular, which you also deploy.

BN: I think this is also a question about the abstract and the material. It seems to me that the general "turn" in the humanities to the material – and my day job is teaching literature – is part of a longer historicist turn that goes back to the 1980s. While everyone tends to think of the humanities as dominated by a "linguistic" post-structuralism (a false image, in fact), the reality I find is a common historicism that constantly invokes the density of "materiality". This I call a "pop Burkeanism", as it repeats Edmund Burke's counter-revolutionary stress on the social as a "dense medium", but now translated into the form of material artefacts – everything from book covers to letters, from publisher's offices to architecture, to "material culture".

This drift is not only politically problematic, but also the general invocation of the "material" often seems fatally abstract. It seems to me that the new materialisms and the various forms of "distant reading" share a paradoxical

structure in which the attention to material specificity is coupled with the capacity to skim over or pick and choose between "objects" treated as equal. In what is perhaps a crass allegory I see this as symptomatic of the omission of the commodity-form, which is a form that at once equalizes all commodities as measurable by value and insists on their specific value within this frame. That's why I have generally tried to explore the continuing possibilities of critique and question this turn to a "post-critical" way of thinking. Critique, I hope, can attend better to the constant processes of transformation of the material to the abstract and vice versa.

In terms of accelerationism I think culture is a central element, which can't simply be wished away. I often say I think we should have all debates about accelerationism in terms of dance music, and this isn't a (probably bad) joke. The role of dance music and electronic music in shaping accelerationism goes back to the work of Nick Land and the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/004807.html) (CCRU) at Warwick, which drew heavily on jungle (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oldschool_jungle) and drum and bass (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drum_and_bass). These forms of post-rave dance music, which deployed sped-up breakbeats, were taken as aesthetic examples of the power of accelerationism. I was also an avid follower of this music, combined with my ongoing interest in Techno. I belong to the same generation as many of the original accelerationists and so we share, to some degree, a common cultural formation. The crucial role of music in the formation of accelerationism, along with a related visual culture, means that the "aesthetic" reception of accelerationism isn't simply a category error. In my work, while I don't deny the energy and acceleration of these forms I'm also interested in how they reflect on elements of friction, both to generate this sense of acceleration and in the way this friction incarnates attempts to transcend or leave behind the body and its labors. The body on the dance floor is both detached from labor, but also experiences a new form of labor, or the repetitions that at once mimic and take to an extreme the repetitions of work.

(https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am//crash-and-burn-debating-accelerationism/metalheadz-logo/)

The logo of the “Metalheads” music label

To treat accelerationism aesthetically is often seen as dismissive, but I think it has to be placed in the context of various avant-garde attempts to instantiate what Badiou calls “the passion for the real (http://www.lacan.com/divide.htm)“: this is the attempt to not only represent social forms, but to intervene or create something by cutting into those forms. The modernist impulses of accelerationism make it heir to this task. The problem I find, again!, is this misplacing of this problem and a collapsing of the difficulty of representation. This is why I also think the psychoanalytic category of fantasy is crucial, as a social or ideological fantasy, to grasping the accelerationist desire. In terms of accelerationism this is a fantasy we could have done with fantasy, which I think is the final fantasy.

Accelerationism turns on fantasies of integration and immersion, with capitalism, with the machinic, and with the abstract. While these fantasies register our experience of the pains of labor and the threats of unemployment, they also transform them into the dream of ecstatic enjoyment – *jouissance*. I think the task today is to resist this sort of pleasure, which also involves pain, in a kind of masochism, but not through the

dismissal of enjoyment. Instead of a new asceticism I think the task is to articulate and politicize pleasures that resist and interrupt our immersion in contemporary capitalism. This requires neither the appeal to a "pure" outside nor the demand for complete immersion, but a practice that engages with the contradictions and violence we confront.

(https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am//crash-and-burn-debating-accelerationism/noys-2014-image/)

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Benjamin Noys teaches at the University of Chichester and his recent publications include *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Theory* (http://www.euppublishing.com/book/9780748638635) (Edinburgh, 2010) and *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism* (http://www.zero-books.net/books/malign-velocities) (Zero Books, 2014). He is currently writing a critique of vitalism in contemporary theory.

(https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am//crash-and-burn-debating-

accelerationism/galloway/)

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alexander R. Galloway teaches at New York University. His latest book is *Laruelle: Against the Digital* (http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/laruelle) (Minnesota, 2014).

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